

Bifurcations of Souls and Spirits across the Modern Era

by strannikov

The disciplines of intellectual history and the history of ideas (such histories as cover years up to c. 1900 CE, for purposes here), in addition to the fluidity and relative imprecision of their contents and narratives, commonly admit to significant imprecisions in the dating of eras of influence and transmission, since the mechanisms and techniques (and the governing temporal velocity) for propagating ideas vary throughout history.

Publication dates, places, and publishers—when known—can begin to tell us when an idea or some treatment of ideas commenced in articulated form, the time and place from which they disseminated, but then of course there's the necessary accounting of how and when, how well and how poorly, ideas and their articulations are taken up by reading and non-reading publics. Persons as gifted and intelligent and as francophone as Blaise Pascal understood what Rene Descartes was up to even while Descartes continued thinking, being, and breathing: many others had to rely on dependable translations just to commence their assessments of Cartesian assertions.

In the decades, if not the century, following the respective seventeenth-century careers of Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, “the Age of Enlightenment” (aka “the Age of Reason”) began to germinate in soils and souls across much of Europe. No precise date for the commencement of the brief flourishing of early modern enlightenment and early modern exhibitions of rationality has ever been stated that could satisfy each and all of the curious. Here, we might agree to leave the dating suitably vague, except that the

argument I'm about to invoke does depend on one commentator's more or less precise dating.

T. S. Eliot's essay in the Times Literary Supplement of 20 October 1921, reviewing the Grierson edition of seventeenth century metaphysical lyrics and poems, is the critical essay in which Eliot deployed his term "dissociation of sensibility" to characterize English-language poetry and poetic practice after the respective careers of Milton and Dryden. This extended quotation is the germ of Eliot's argument:

#

"When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

"We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli (sic), or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others. The language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the 'Country Churchyard' (to say

nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the 'Coy Mistress.'

"The second effect of the influence of Milton and Dryden followed from the first, and was therefore slow in manifestation. The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected. In one or two passages of Shelley's 'Triumph of Life,' in the second 'Hyperion' there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated."

#

Eliot's characterization of the early years of the eighteenth century as the beginning of "the sentimental age" itself differs nominally from accounts naming those selfsame years "the Augustan Age" of English literature (narrowly conceived as the reign of Queen Anne [1702 to 1714] or broadly construed as the entire first half of the eighteenth century), succeeded eventually by "the Age of Johnson" (who himself coined the disparagement "metaphysical poets", Eliot duly noted) until "the Age of Romanticism" could begin c. 1798 to endure however far into the nineteenth century your chosen literary historian cares to put its terminus.

While we cannot be surprised if the tide of High Romanticism receded from British shores before receding from American shores, some or many literary historians would still quibble that romanticism in English language letters persisted well into the twentieth century, and with them I would agree. —but even if, formally, in English language poetry and poetic practice romanticism breathed its sputtering last gasp only at or around c. 1950, I otherwise doubt seriously that romanticism in its broader cultural aspect and influence has ever quite died its entire and deserved death: thus this essay, which is not concerned with treating literary history exclusively but with examining an episode in the history of ideas somewhat broadly.

In 1921 Eliot could still bewail “a dissociation of sensibility . . . from which we have never recovered”. At least one century ago, the romantic ethos was still alive and still kicking, in spite of recurring attempts through the second half of the nineteenth century (into decades of the twentieth century) either to overcome it altogether or simply to camouflage and wire the corpse so that, unburied, it could still pretend to some semblance of life and animation. The funeral rites for Romanticism never having been served formally, the corpse (animate or no) remains unburied, and we are obliged even in 2024 to endure whiffs of the corpse's stench (whatever else the accomplishments of Romantic verse). Arguably, Eliot's view from 1921 remains apt: we still have not recovered from “the dissociation of sensibility” which, unlike Eliot perhaps, we may impute to the split between classicism and romanticism “from which we have never recovered”, as well as to the psychic split that followed eventually from the advent of Cartesian rationalism.

#

Most people are neither poets nor philosophers, but disabusing ourselves of thinking that we might qualify as either is no easy task, since our pedestrian access to language helps assure us of our latent poetic gifts and our (merely uncultivated) philosophical propensities. This would be true, my reading of competent histories from capable historians tells me, whether we are obliged to live in an era of continuing dissociation of sensibility or whether we yet lived in some contemporary aeon of integrated sensibility, as in those aeons prior to Milton and Dryden (or prior to Bacon and Descartes) inhabited by at least some integrated souls and integrated spirits.

Eliot did not exactly err in timing the advent of “the sentimental age” to the concurrent “Augustan Age” of English letters: the noble Augustans were the temporary champions of classical or neo-classical verities that had been disputed at the end of the seventeenth century in both England and France in terms of “the Contest of the Ancients and the Moderns”. The champions of the Ancients won the initial victory (at least in England), but the

partisans of the Moderns already were grouping and regrouping and would in short decades overwhelm and displace Classical decorum and discipline, affective restraint and reason both, and . . . comparatively undifferentiated and undissociated sensibility. Romanticism was gestating throughout England's Augustan Age, and at that no one should be surprised.

My task here is not to bemoan the eclipse of eighteenth-century English celebrations of classicism (nor, *nota bene*, is my task to commend any facile recovery of classicism or neo-classicism today): it is to wonder about the heritage of subsequent histories, cultural and intellectual, of a dissociated sensibility characteristic of the Romantic era which, though it may have subsided largely in formal literary practice, yet creeps and crawls with subterranean persistence elsewhere. (In spite of the marvels of the internet, it is not possible for me to cite objections to the legitimacy of Eliot's views that came from Leonard Unger in 1950, from F. W. Bateson in 1951 and 1952, or from Frank Kermode as late as 1957: nor can I say whether any of these critics of Eliot's view cited only the proposed literary splits among intellection, affect, and sensuousness or whether they enlarged their arguments to assess the psychic split engendered by the earlier onset of Cartesian rationalism.)

How was it again that Eliot characterized the practice or approach of Romantic poets? "The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced; they reflected" (no room here for the strange case of Edgar Poe, sigh alas and alack). If Romantic notions are in fact not utterly dead, then we might pause to wonder about our current moment and about how we think ourselves equipped for the decades and the century directly ahead: could it be time for us to undertake a conscious, deliberate effort to repair (to begin to repair) Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility", to recover souls no longer divided or fragmented by distinct splits into "intellectual" and "sensible", to reforge souls and spirits into organisms unified in cognition and affectivity jointly?

Such chores cannot be undertaken without recognizing and overcoming a few lingering hurdles. Someone might argue that the historic disparagement of “reason” (however sequestered or refined by Descartes, et al.) to the valorization of “emotion” has in fact been an articulate response to the practice of “democracy” (an odd classical relic all its own). Most people and citizens do not possess intellects too vast or accomplished, too trained or too informed: they are not bereft of brains, but they are loath to submit to requisite intellectual discipline. Alternatively, however, most people and most citizens cannot help but be possessed fully of the apparatus of emotion, to considerable degrees of emotional candor or frenzy, to extended ranges of manias, neuroses, and phobias (actual phobias, that is, not mere aesthetic aversions or simple disagreements), or to expressions of untethered or unchecked infantilism.

The earliest poetic practitioners of Romanticism enjoyed benefits that were and had to be denied to their successors, since this is an instance of how history typically behaves. Proto-Romantics and early Romantics could valorize comparatively mature emotional states because they were emerging from a cultural context of comparatively mature intellectual attainment. These particular circumstances could not be expected to have endured into later decades (up to a century or more later) if the Romantic movement was itself heralding the whole time Eliot's “revolt against the ratiocinative, the descriptive; thinking and feeling by fits, unbalanced”. Romanticism remained a powerful cultural force across most of the nineteenth century, we are obliged to concede, so it should not surprise anyone that, intentionally or inadvertently or both, the partisans of Romanticism were helping to forge a posterity of bifurcated (hence, unbalanced) spirits and souls.

The earliest conspicuous sign of the emerging frantic imbalance came, of course, with the French Revolution. Unintelligent rage accounts for the Revolution's excesses about as well and about as much as the failure of the Revolution's intelligentsia to manage affairs . . . intelligently. Revolutionary ardor

was not lacking in France; on the other hand, the capacity of revolutionaries to actually think sagaciously by contrast could be imputed to the doughty Americans who had only a short time earlier benefitted from French monarchical generosity, probably because in their comparatively provincial circumstances the American revolutionaries were still under the influence of “undissociated sensibilities” permitting mature cognition and mature affectivity.

Consideration of public expressions of violent emotional outbursts from a citizenry that has not gained or been permitted to gain intellectual articulation is one legacy of the French Revolution. (While considering this, do take a moment to reflect on the interrupted career of the classical/proto-Romantic poet André Chénier, guillotined only short days before Robespierre's own execution.) The authenticity of expressions of sincere emotion, however, does not necessarily relieve anyone of responsibility for whatever deeds raw emotion might lead them to undertake. In their day the French guillotines were of much sturdier construction than the revolutionary society itself, the examples of Chénier and Robespierre both could begin to attest.

—but hold on: isn't an inherent risk of cultural domination by soulless rationalists (who themselves can well become untethered rational lunatics) entailed even with the suggestion that we aim at overcoming the dissociation of sensibility? If you look hard for a moment at the technocratic wizardry all around you today, it is already late in the day to concern yourself overmuch with the ascendancy of intellectuals, rationalists, and brainiacs: they are already poised to manipulate your interests and native appetites, and you are already poised to assent to their machinations, especially if your soul has already been conveniently compartmentalized to equip you with emotional spontaneity and affective fortitude while denying you adequate intellectual equipment and any hope of mature judgment that could emerge therefrom.

Most residents of Planet Earth in late 2024 CE are recipients and beneficiaries of passive indulgence: we have been

permitted and encouraged by our elites of various competencies (cognitive and otherwise) to emote, emote, emote to our brainless hearts' respective contents for decade upon decade to this present day and hour, with nary a caution, nary a correction from the wizards and technocrats building a world of walls of seamless mediated existence around us. For most people and most citizens today, it is already far too late: and as the dawning threats and perils of the advent of Technogenic Climate Change begin to arrive, most people and citizens will find (and will have no ample or legitimate reasons to be surprised at discovering) themselves to be at the mercy of both technocrats and natural forces well beyond their control.

#

With these assertions and characterizations of modern history made, it is time to begin to conclude with an appeal or a declaration: it is up to poets and poetic practitioners active in the Western tradition to begin to address and to overcome whatever psychic split afflicts us and our contemporaries, to recover the unification of intellect and sensibility necessary to effect the healing of bifurcated souls and mutilated spirits, to the upbuilding both of whole individual lives and the maintenance of a civilization we cannot escape and actually cannot afford to disown uncharitably.

Of course, far fewer are apt to agree with yours truly than with Eliot himself a hundred years on: so even if Eliot was merely approximately correct in his diagnosis, this lone voice here limits itself to as few concluding points as possible (a manageable three):

First, without trusting that I have gotten too much right thus far, begin to assess for yourself whether or to what extent Western culture has developed in the way Eliot has described. Look for yourself at any available evidence for the innocuous frivolities that our mass media are pleased to encourage and entertain routinely, decade in and decade out. See if you can discern for yourself whether most of your contemporaries have been discouraged from informed intellectual pursuits and informed intellectual engagement, from reasoned examinations, and from

critical assessments of what we all have been invited to accept passively.

Second: if you can persuade yourself that you do not in fact see too much applied reason, informed criticism, and engaged intellect at work in the culture and among the people around you, then begin to locate those trails of crumbs that have been laid carefully by some few of our immediate predecessors to lead us safely or largely intact out of the labyrinth to which we find ourselves confined. This effort will entail much hard work—much prolonged intellectual analysis and much difficult investigation, much deep reading and much penetrating thought, much thorough and exhausting research—most unlike any pedagogy you have ever received at the hands of any philanthropic academic arbiters, commissars, or dogmaticians. This work will have to be undertaken broadly outside of institutional channels of academia, since academic institutions themselves have been co-opted to help outfit us with the hobbling ties and chains, the intellectual blindfolds and blinders of academic preference and arbitration, institutional loyalties and professional commitments, corrupted by commercial and mindful (but otherwise detached and remote) political interests.

Finally, thus equipped if you so choose these tasks, begin to see and experience the world with an integrated soul and an undivided spirit: begin to tell the rest of us what you have begun to see, how fresh and startling the world appears when vision recovers its connections with both intelligence and integrated emotion, when apprehension of direct and unmediated experience begins to inform the mind, when a human anthropology not beholden to tech tyrants and academic careerists, political thespians and media manipulators can come into focus clearly enough to permit human responses to the human condition confronting us all and to whatever threats to human existence may be lurking just beyond any close horizon.

Especially now with the heralded advent of augmented “intelligence”, only a human anthropology permitting integration of human intellect and emotional engagement can equip us to abandon

a seamless mediated existence of commercial treadwheel spinning,
in order to gain—with breathing, undying hope—direct immediacy of
a human existence populated with bodies moving with animate
souls, active spirits, and engaged minds.

-END-

